

Decision Memo

Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service
Oconee Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
Putnam County, Georgia

DECISION

Description of Decision

My decision is to implement the actions proposed in my April 2, 2009 scoping letter regarding a Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project within the Cedar Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) located off US Highway 212 in Putnam County, Georgia as shown on the attached map. Those actions include removal of dead pine trees and unwanted tree species, mechanized soil preparation, seeding with native warm season grasses, and signing.

The project involves restoration of native grasses to improve wildlife habitat on approximately 20 acres recently treated for southern pine beetle (SPB) infestation. Currently, these areas have pine debris left from the salvage operations, along with a dense growth of sweetgum sprouts competing with native grasses for sunlight, water and nutrients. This competition will eventually block the sunlight reaching the grasses and exclude them from the openings. Sweetgum is of low value to wildlife. Removing dead pine trees and sweetgum from these areas and replanting to native grasses will maximize forage and cover for several wildlife species including quail, dove, small mammals, deer, turkey, and many neo-tropical migratory bird species.

The project area is within the Habitat Management Area established for the federally listed, endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW); management prescription 8D in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan . Most of the adjacent SPB areas will be reforested in pines that will provide future foraging and nesting trees for the RCW. The Forest Plan allows for management of 4-10 percent of the RCW recovery area as early-successional forest. Currently, less than 1 percent of the RCW recovery area is in early-successional forest.

Actions Included in This Decision

Implementation of the project will include the following: use of heavy equipment, such as a bulldozer, grain drill, tractor harrow, and mini-excavator, for soil preparation; seeding with native warm season grasses; and signing to allow public viewing of the habitat work and the wildlife species that benefit. All disturbed soils will be seeded, fertilized, and mulched before completion of the project. Maintenance of these areas is planned for the 5 year period following implementation, including mowing, burning, re-seeding, and fertilizing as needed.

Connected Actions

There are none.

Extraordinary Circumstances

There are none known. A biological evaluation and analysis of the effects on heritage resources is contained in the project file and indicates that there will be no effect on listed species or heritage resources.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

I have determined that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action and the proposed action is within a category listed in 36 CFR 220.6(e). My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the project file.

Category of Exclusion

Specifically, this project falls within category 6 of 36 CFR 220.6(e): *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public scoping included listing in the Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions, and mailing 74 scoping letters to the District's mailing list. A legal ad was published in the Eatonton Messenger on April 9, 2009 with responses requested by May 9, 2009. One letter, one e-mail and one phone call were received regarding this project on or before the close of the comment period (project file).

All comments received were considered in the analysis for this project. All comments were in support of the project. All included the suggestion that other wildlife foods be planted in addition to the native grasses. Regular plantings will occur along with the native grasses and will provide foraging availability for all wildlife species in the area. The project is being funded by an Answer the Call grant to Quail Unlimited through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and has the support of, and will be implemented with the assistance of, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and local volunteers.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL AND IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This type of decision is subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8. However, no negative comments were received that necessitate initiation of an appeal period. Consequently, this particular decision is not appealable. Implementation of this decision may begin immediately and is likely to occur in the spring of 2009.

CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Liz Caldwell, Oconee Ranger District, 1199 Madison Road, Eatonton, GA 31024; (706) 485-1776, ext. 105.

SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Erin M. Bronk

May 19, 2009

ERIN M. BRONK
District Ranger

Date

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